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Software Developer, Cybersecurity Analyst.

When Sub-Saharan Africa's Combined GDP Exceeded That of China and India

A Precise Reassessment Using World Bank National Accounts Data

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About The Author

Djibril Chimère Diaw

Software Developer, Cybersecurity Analyst.

Dedication

To

my mother Marème Fall

my father Amadou Chimère Diaw

my wife Isabelle Diaw

my children

Fatou-Chimère Diaw, Ahmadou-Chimère Diaw,

Marième-Chimère Diaw, Aïssata-Chimère Diaw .

my grandparents

Fatou Methiour Ndiaye & Waly Sega Fall

Fatou Faye & Souleymane Chimère Diaw

Teachers

To those who shall come into the world a century after me, beginning in the year two thousand and seventy-two.

To all mothers,
to those who made our coming into the world possible through the gift of themselves,
to those who, even today, carry, give birth to, nourish, protect, and raise life,
to those who, tomorrow, will continue to open the path of human existence.

To all women who, in silence or in light, have risked their bodies, their strength, and sometimes their lives so that humanity may endure.
To their quiet courage, their daily resilience, and their founding love.

May this work stand as an act of recognition,
a tribute passed on from generation to generation,
and a word of gratitude addressed to those without whom nothing would have been, nothing is, and nothing will be.

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ENGLISH

Preface

International economic comparisons profoundly shape our understanding of the world. They structure dominant narratives, guide teaching, influence public policies, and often—implicitly—contribute to the hierarchical ranking of regions and peoples. Yet these comparisons rest on methodological choices that are rarely questioned: the choice of indicators, units of analysis, time periods, and geographical categories.

This book begins from a simple observation that is largely absent from standard economic literature: when Sub-Saharan Africa is considered not as a juxtaposition of isolated states, but as a regional aggregate as defined by international institutions themselves, certain customary comparisons with India and China yield unexpected results. Over several decades in the second half of the twentieth century, the combined gross domestic product of Sub-Saharan Africa exceeded that of India and, for a significant period, that of China.

The ambition of this book is neither to overturn symbolic hierarchies nor to rewrite global economic history on the basis of a single indicator. Nor is it to conflate aggregate economic size with living standards, or to deny the differentiated development trajectories of economies. Its objective is at once more modest and more demanding: to render visible empirically verifiable facts, drawn from official sources, that have largely been rendered invisible by dominant comparative frameworks.

By relying exclusively on World Bank data and adopting a deliberately transparent methodology, this work invites a fundamental intellectual exercise: questioning what we believe we know when we speak of “backwardness,” “marginality,” or “economic weight.” It shows that oversimplified narratives often thrive not on the absence of data, but on their partial selection.

The decision to present this work in multiple languages—both international and African—proceeds from the same logic. It affirms that the production and interpretation of economic knowledge are not the preserve of a single linguistic space, and that linguistic plurality can accompany scientific rigor without diluting it.

In this sense, this book does not offer a definitive conclusion, but rather an invitation: an invitation to revisit analytical frameworks, to confront data rather than narratives, and to recognize that the economic history of Africa, like that of the world as a whole, becomes more intelligible when examined with precision, nuance, and empirical honesty.

The Combined GDP of Africa South of the Sahara Compared to India and China (1960–2024)

Abstract

Mainstream economic literature rarely compares the macroeconomic performance of Africa south of the Sahara as a regional aggregate with major Asian economies. Using official World Bank data (indicator NY.GDP.MKTP.CD, nominal GDP in current U.S. dollars), this article shows that the combined GDP of Africa south of the Sahara exceeded that of India during the period 1976–1998, as well as in 2005, 2006, and 2008, and exceeded that of China between 1976 and 1991, with the exception of 1989.

Although counterintuitive relative to dominant narratives, these results are empirically verifiable and methodologically transparent. The article discusses the limitations of the indicator used and the analytical, pedagogical, and policy implications of these findings.

1. Introduction

Africa south of the Sahara is frequently portrayed in economic research as a structurally marginal region relative to major emerging Asian economies, particularly India and China. This representation is most often based on comparisons between individual nation-states or on per capita indicators, without a systematic examination of the region's aggregate economic weight.

This article adopts a strictly empirical approach: what do official data reveal when the total GDP of Africa south of the Sahara is directly compared with that of India and China over the long run? The objective is not to reassess relative living standards, but to analyze overall economic size as measured by international national accounts.

2. Data and Methodology

2.1 Data Source

The data used come exclusively from the World Bank, through the following indicator:

- **NY.GDP.MKTP.CD**: Gross Domestic Product (GDP), current U.S. dollars.

The period covered extends from 1960 to 2024, subject to data availability.

2.2 Definition of Africa South of the Sahara

In the official World Bank databases (CSV format), the region studied is identified under the label **“Sub-Saharan Africa.”** This institutional designation corresponds to the set of countries located south of the Sahara Desert, according to the World Bank’s regional classification.

In this article, the expression **“Africa south of the Sahara”** is used as an analytical equivalent of this institutional category. The two terms are therefore strictly synonymous within the scope of this study.

The GDP of Africa south of the Sahara is used exactly as published by the World Bank, without any manual recomposition, ensuring transparency and reproducibility.

2.3 Comparison Method

For each available year:

- the total GDP of Africa south of the Sahara is compared with the GDP of:
    - India (IND),
    - China (CHN);
- all values are expressed in current U.S. dollars;
- no adjustment is made for inflation, purchasing power parity, or exchange rate movements.

The analysis relies on a direct comparison of GDP levels, without smoothing or statistical transformation.

3. Empirical Results

Table 1 – Years in Which the GDP of Africa South of the Sahara Exceeded That of India and China
(Nominal GDP, current USD)

Comparison	Years of exceedance	Temporal structure	Synthetic comment
Africa south of the Sahara > India	1976–1998; 2005, 2006, 2008	Largely continuous	Prolonged superiority of the African aggregate prior to India's sustained growth acceleration
Africa south of the Sahara > China	1976–1991 (except 1989)	Quasi-continuous	Period preceding China's rapid industrialization and global integration

Source: World Bank, indicator NY.GDP.MKTP.CD (author's calculations).

3.1 Africa South of the Sahara and India

The data indicate that the total GDP of Africa south of the Sahara exceeded that of India continuously between 1976 and 1998, and again in 2005, 2006, and 2008.

Before the mid-1970s, the two GDPs evolved at comparable levels. From the late 2000s onward, India's structural growth acceleration led to a durable overtaking of Africa south of the Sahara.

3.2 Africa South of the Sahara and China

The comparison with China reveals a particularly notable result. Between 1976 and 1991, the nominal GDP of Africa south of the Sahara exceeded that of China, with the exception of 1989.

This period precedes China's rapid economic ascent, prior to its accelerated industrialization and deep integration into global value chains during the 1990s and 2000s.

4. Discussion

4.1 Scope of the Results

These results do not imply that Africa south of the Sahara was more prosperous than India or China, nor that living standards were comparable. They indicate only that, in terms of total economic output measured in nominal value, the region represented a larger economic mass during specific periods.

They highlight the importance of indicator choice and units of analysis. Comparisons based exclusively on GDP per capita or purchasing power parity tend to obscure these aggregate dynamics.

4.2 Methodological Limitations

Several limitations must be explicitly acknowledged:

- nominal GDP is sensitive to exchange rate fluctuations;
- Africa south of the Sahara is a heterogeneous region rather than a unified state;
- the comparisons do not account for internal income distribution or institutional capacity.

These limitations do not invalidate the empirical finding, provided it is interpreted within the strictly defined methodological framework.

5. Implications

5.1 Implications for Economic Research

The results suggest the need to more systematically integrate African regional aggregates into international macroeconomic comparisons. The absence of such comparisons contributes to a partial understanding of global economic trajectories.

5.2 Pedagogical and Analytical Implications

The invisibility of these facts in textbooks and syntheses reinforces a narrative of permanent African marginality. Rigorous presentation of the data enables a more nuanced understanding of recent economic history and encourages critical engagement with indicators.

6. Conclusion

Based on official World Bank data, this article shows that the combined GDP of Africa south of the Sahara exceeded that of India for more than two continuous decades and during several years in the mid-2000s, and exceeded that of China during a prolonged period preceding its rapid economic takeoff.

This empirically verifiable but rarely discussed fact invites a reassessment of the comparative frameworks used to analyze African economic trajectories.

Keywords: Africa south of the Sahara; nominal GDP; India; China; international comparisons; World Bank.

DATA

World Bank

Country Name	Sub-Saharan Africa	India	China
Country Code	SSF	IND	CHN
Indicator Name	GDP (current US$)	GDP (current US$)	GDP (current US$)
Indicator Code	NY,GDP,MKTP,CD	NY,GDP,MKTP,CD	NY,GDP,MKTP,CD
1960	35992821734,5306	37029883876,1839	59846235024,7318
1961	37521652879,664	39232435784,0358	50162299349,7871
1962	40553510689,9697	42161481858,0819	47310737754,2287
1963	46127211026,2209	48421923459,1235	50812227918,5753
1964	45891005945,7252	56480289940,9899	59821862703,4023
1965	50543636348,1424	59556105229,0052	70565994356,1828
1966	54780137858,9382	45581230504,071	76854053259,209
1967	54842900794,1516	50134942204	73011350596,2485
1968	58686298467,8433	53085455870,6667	70980323818,7853
1969	66258274672,141	58447995017,3333	79847786729,1898
1970	73998855803,6159	62422483054,6667	92752930873,1912
1971	76078810558,0095	67351404351,833	99959013879,6308
1972	85727757471,5518	71464700666,9869	113871930713,841
1973	109279758227,601	85517673172,5513	138764340892
1974	138641757472,571	99526597933,6331	144418433058,472
1975	152220676931,201	98473832017,3242	163687619735,857
1976	164674481161,533	102716451979,68	154196810058,643
1977	180959309200,527	121486641441,309	175226595859,778
1978	202653018739,213	137302319828,995	149788617886,179
1979	238924186293,265	152995442497,709	178573913043,478
1980	300099132923,764	186328579302,068	191487500000
1981	404964037903,535	193491368445,573	196218253968,254
1982	376485492802,867	200715624830,902	205480916030,534
1983	337927843621,059	218262146413,158	231130268199,234
1984	301936206027,115	212157645177,652	260442857142,857
1985	288309829782,491	232511554840,372	310064625850,34
1986	270239968939,1	248985994040,59	301310144927,536
1987	302632023546,226	279033584092,223	273455156950,673
1988	318689570071,268	296589670895,932	312888888888,889
1989	324390129475,55	296042052944,66	348380566801,619
1990	379792150457,814	320979026420,035	361560229445,507
1991	406697201565,697	270105341879,226	384510452961,672
1992	365899311503,049	288208070278,013	428502354788,069
1993	369858486527,505	279295648982,529	446557291212,148
1994	378181617912,501	327274843459,429	566929539493,172
1995	481078758906,208	360281909643,489	738190896227,55
1996	537529901697,435	392896866204,516	868523936530,083
1997	565282701495,442	415867563592,829	967753570434,667
1998	566816017701,65	421351317224,941	1037134141760,35
1999	404651773356,155	458821052615,79	1103843203575,64
2000	428788505804,802	468395521654,458	1223754919971,05
2001	410936270042,78	485440139204,171	1355036590251,52

2002	449500894158,767	514939140318,756	1489821682050,54
2003	565919936760,318	607700687237,318	1683903309843,85
2004	702843204651,659	709152728830,775	1984196551300,44
2005	836993712579,377	820383763511,445	2317551298052,05
2006	988873289522,059	940259888787,721	2791498472804,33
2007	1145239979455,74	1216736438834,96	3604055822571,63
2008	1301030210080,85	1198895139005,92	4667346414521,95
2009	1241958752180,26	1341888016994,9	5189577094997,58
2010	1469616438039,84	1675615519484,96	6192564874453,29
2011	1650955876097,19	1823051829894,55	7671757207851,29
2012	1717295733292,83	1827637590410,41	8673664713189,24
2013	1825489288568,26	1856721507621,58	9743124247267,24
2014	1902908083279,38	2039126479154,52	10674533168257,4
2015	1688024093175,49	2103588360044,94	11280814787468,9
2016	1531896244777,67	2294796885663,16	11456024084962
2017	1672127811803,69	2651474262755,45	12537559062282,9
2018	1798796101321,48	2702929641648,74	14147765772963,8
2019	2045711007848,14	2835606256558,19	14560167101283,4
2020	1902392262699,06	2674851578587,27	14996414166715,1
2021	2140795804040	3167270623260,47	18201698719564
2022	2292617010267	3346107287730,93	18316765021690,2
2023	2117597425394,65	3638489096033,86	18270356654533,2
2024	1979078503991,37	3909891533858,08	18743803170827,2